

4

The Ancient Near East

Learning Objectives

The following summarizes what a student should have learned from reading this chapter of *A History of Western Art*.

It is assumed that students can identify all works by title, artist (if known), culture (or nationality) and time period, medium, and style. It is also assumed that students will look up and be able to define the bolded key terms. In addition, further examples of what a student should be familiar with are listed below.

After reading Chapter 4, students should be able to do the following:

1. Locate the following on a map: Anatolia, Mesopotamia, Assyria, Akkad, Sumer, Elam, the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, the Mediterranean Sea.
2. Describe the evolution of cuneiform.
3. Identify the major gods of the Mesopotamian pantheon and summarize the *Epic of Gilgamesh*.
4. Compare the ziggurat with the Apadana. Explain the function and context of each.
5. Compare Akkad and Sumer.
6. Discuss the nature of the two steles illustrated in the chapter: the stele of Naram-Sin, and the stele inscribed with law code of Hammurabi.
7. Discuss the combination of naturalism and stylization in Mesopotamian art.
8. Discuss the combination of human with animal form in ancient Near Eastern art.
9. Describe the iconography of the stele of Naram-Sin.
10. Describe the relationship of form and function in the lamassu.
11. Compare the Assyrian and Persian empires.
12. Draw and label the parts of the Persian column and compare and contrast it with the upright stones at Stonehenge.
13. Explain the political meaning of the bull capitals at Persepolis and of the lions in the reliefs of Assurnasirpal II.
14. Discuss the nature of metaphor in the gold Scythian stag.

Lecture Outline

- A. The Neolithic Era
 - a. Developed earlier in the Near East than in Europe
 - b. Transition from nomadic to a more settled life

- c. Jericho
 - i. One of the world's oldest fortified sites
 - ii. Neolithic plastered skull—"portraits" of the deceased
- d. Çatal Hüyük
 - i. Largest Neolithic site discovered in the ancient Near East
 - ii. Like in Jericho, corpses were buried under dwelling floors
 - iii. Bull motif adorned elaborately-decorated chambers that may have functioned as religious shrines
- B. Mesopotamia
 - a. Part of modern Iraq, located between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers
 - b. Center of ancient Near Eastern civilization
 - c. Mesopotamia literally means the "land between the rivers"
 - d. The Uruk Period (c. 3500–3100 B.C.)
 - i. Earliest known writing developed
 - ii. Alabaster vase of the era displays several artistic conventions characteristic of the ancient Near East
 - e. Mesopotamian Gods
 - i. Anu—male bull god of the sky, whose roar was thunder
 - ii. Ninhursag—the great mother goddess, Lady of the Mountain
 - iii. Enlil—god of the air
 - iv. Ea (or Enki)—the water god
 - v. Nanna (or Sin)—the moon goddess
 - vi. Utu (later Shamash)—the sun god
 - vii. Inanna (later Ishtar and Astarte)—goddess of love, fertility, and war
 - f. Ziggurat—an imitation mountain
 - i. A stepped, usually solid, load-bearing structure
 - ii. The White Temple sits atop the oldest surviving ziggurat
 - g. Cylinder Seals
 - i. Stone cylinder onto which images have been carved
 - ii. Seal impressions designated ownership; used to keep inventories and accounts and later to legalize documents
 - h. From Pictures to Words
 - i. Cylinder seals contributed to the development of writing
 - ii. Cuneiform—the earliest-known written language from Sumer
 - iii. Written language initially used for practical purposes and later became a tool of creative expression
 - i. The *Epic of Gilgamesh*
 - i. Oldest surviving epic poem
 - ii. Written on cuneiform tablets from the second millennium B.C.
 - j. Sumer: Early Dynastic Period (c. 2800–2000 B.C.)
 - i. Tell Asmar: small cult figures from the Tell Asmar site
 - ii. Ur: lyre soundbox from Ur site gives clues to many things
 - iii. Enjoyment of music and use of instruments
 - iv. Superb craftsmanship of early Sumerian artists
 - v. Ancient mythology and artistic tastes

- k. Akkad (c. 2300–2100 B.C.)
 - i. Sargon I
 - 1. Founder of the Akkadian dynasty
 - 2. Subject of the first birth story
 - ii. Naram-Sin
 - 1. Sargon I's grandson
 - 2. Memorialized in the stone marker stele of Naram-Sin
- l. Neo-Sumerian (c. 2100–1800 B.C.)
 - i. Gudea—best known king of Lagash
 - 1. Peaceful rule allowed for an extensive building program
 - 2. Embodied the political theory that rulers were the gods' chosen intermediaries on earth; basis for the divine right of kings
 - 3. Subject of several statues made of diorite
- m. The Ziggurat of Ur
 - i. Neo-Sumerian period reached a peak under Ur-Nammu
 - ii. Ur-Nammu supervised construction of the great ziggurat
- n. Babylon (c. 1900–539 B.C.)
 - i. Old Babylonian Period (c. 1830–1550 B.C.)
 - ii. Babylon gained control of Mesopotamia under King Hammurabi
 - iii. The Law Code of Hammurabi
 - 1. 300 statutes written in Akkadian in 51 cuneiform columns
 - 2. The stated purpose of the laws was to protect the weak from the strong; however, its true intent was to maintain social continuity and stability
- C. Anatolia: The Hittites (c. 1450–1200 B.C.)
 - a. Assyria
 - i. Emerged as the next unifying force in Mesopotamia
 - ii. Located along the Tigris in modern Syria
 - iii. State is well documented
 - 1. Desire to memorialize their own accomplishments
 - 2. Availability of local stone with which to create and build
 - a. Alabaster reliefs like the palace walls
 - b. Monumental sculptures that guard the palace gate
 - b. The Neo-Babylonian Empire (c. 612–539 B.C.)
 - i. Nebuchadnezzar takes control from the Assyrians
 - 1. The Ishtar Gate is the only remaining monumental architecture from the reign of Nebuchadnezzar
 - a. One of eight gateways with round arches inside Babylon
 - b. Superior strength and durability
 - c. Round arches—a curved lintel much stronger than a straight one
 - d. Glazing protects the facing tiles making them water-resistant

- c. Iran (c. 5000–331 B.C.)
 - i. Believed to have been settled by Indo-European Aryans
 - ii. Distinctive pottery form begins in the fifth millennium B.C.
 - 1. Elegant forms with animal subjects
 - iii. “Plunderers for profit” destroy the archaeological record
 - 1. The *Kneeling Bull*’s origin cannot be exactly known
- d. The Scythians (8th–4th century B.C.)
 - i. Nomadic; thus their art was portable
 - ii. Scythian animal art’s visual metaphors
- e. Achaemenid Persia (539–331 B.C.)
 - i. Persians rise to dominance in the Near East
 - ii. Culture and style named after the founder of the dynasty
 - iii. Most elaborate of Achaemenid architectural works were palaces; Persepolis is the best example
 - iv. Elaborate columns and reliefs lining the walls further emphasized the king’s power and grandeur

Key Terms

armature
 base
 capital
cella
 column
 convention
 cuneiform
 cylinder seal
 glaze
 glyptic art
 intaglio
 hierarchical proportion
 lamassu
 lapis lazuli
 load-bearing construction
 pillar
 provenience
 register
 shaft
 stele
 ziggurat

Arts and Artists

This is a list of all the key works in this chapter.

- 4.1 Neolithic plastered skull, Jericho, c. 7000 B.C.
- 4.3 Sculpted vase, Uruk, c. 3500–3000 B.C.
- 4.4 The White Temple on its ziggurat, Uruk, c. 3500–3000 B.C.
- 4.6 Cylinder impression and seal from Uruk, c. 3500–3000 B.C.
- 4.7 Clay tablet with cuneiform text, probably from Jemdet Nasr, Iraq, c. 3000 B.C.
- 4.8 Statues from the Abu Temple, Tell Asmar, c. 2700–2500 B.C.
- 4.9 Restoration of a Sumerian lyre, c. 2600 B.C.
- 4.10 Head of an Akkadian ruler (possibly Sargon I), from Nineveh, Iraq, c. 2250 B.C.
- 4.11 Victory stele of Naram-Sin, c. 2300–2200 B.C.
- 4.12 Head of Gudea, Lagash, c. 2100 B.C.
- 4.13 Gudea with temple plan, Lagash, Iraq, c. 2100 B.C.
- 4.16 Stele inscribed with the Law Code of Hammurabi, c. 1792–1750 B.C.
- 4.17 Lion Gate (Royal Gate), Hattusas, Boghazköy, Turkey, c. 1400 B.C.
- 4.18 Hittite war god, from the King's Gate at Hattusas, Boghazköy, Turkey, c. 1400 B.C.
- 4.19 King Assurnasirpal II hunting lions, Nimrud, Iraq, c. 883–859 B.C.
- 4.20 Lamassu, from the gateway, Sargon II's palace at Dur Sharrukin (now Khorsabad, Iraq), c. 720 B.C.
- 4.21 Ishtar Gate (reconstructed), Babylon, c. 575 B.C.
- 4.22 Beaker, Susa, capital of Elam (now in Iran), c. 5000–4000 B.C.
- 4.23 *Kneeling Bull*, southwest Iran, Proto-Elamite, c. 3100–2999 B.C.
- 4.24 Stag, from Kostromskaya, Russia, 7th century B.C.
- 4.25 Apadana (Audience Hall) of Darius, Persepolis (in modern Iran), c. 500 B.C.

4.26 Bull capital, Persepolis, c. 500 B.C.

4.27 Royal guards, relief on the stairway to the Audience Hall of Darius, Persepolis c. 500 B.C.

4.28 Achaemenid drinking vessel, Persian, 5th century B.C.

Discussion Questions

1. Although parts of the Near East were sometimes brought together under the rule of a powerful dynasty, the Near East generally consisted of a number of different city-states and kingdoms that alternately rose to prominence or sank into obscurity or submission. There was no single government that ruled over all of the Near East throughout all of ancient history. Nonetheless, Near Eastern art shows a notable retention of artistic conventions from one civilization to the next. Which conventions proved most durable? Which changed over time as new civilizations emerged? What does the uniformity of many of these conventions suggest about the development of Near Eastern culture? Should the Near East be regarded as a series of separate civilizations, or as one monolithic civilization?
2. The law code of Hammurabi applied differently to people of different classes. The higher one's status in Babylonian society, the more mild the punishments one faced. Like Babylon, the rest of Near Eastern society was hierarchical. How did notions of hierarchy get translated into works of art? How were people of higher status depicted differently from people of lower status? Did Near Eastern art ever depict common people or were only kings and their retinues represented? Did common people in the Near East have any relationship to art, or was it the exclusive preserve of the ruling class?
3. Kings were perhaps the most common subjects of Near Eastern art. How did such art depict kings? What conventions were used to denote royal status? What relationship between the kings and the people did works of art portray? What was the relationship between the kings and the gods? How did Near Eastern kings use art to establish and maintain their authority? Based on Near Eastern art, what functions did kings serve, what duties did they perform, and what constituted a good ruler?